

Ironbound group marks 15 years

Neighbors praise organization's accomplishments

By FREDERICK W. BYRD

The Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year as area residents praise the group for helping preserve a stable neighborhood and giving those who live there a voice in public policy.

"They have earned the trust of the community as people who care and are working with us for a better life," said Rev. Dave Burgess of St. Stephan's United Church of Christ in the area.

Veronica Faulkner, a member of the ICC board, said: "The important point is this has remained a grass roots organization. The projects arise from the needs of our community."

Vic DeLuca, administrative coordinator, remembers the group began in 1969 with a day care center.

"This has always been a working class area and there was a concern that there was no place to leave the children when both parents had to go out.

"We converted an old Acme supermarket at 146 Wilson Ave. into the Ironbound Children's Center. Parents came in and did a lot of work, and there was some money from the state and the Urban Coalition.

"We had about 30 children. Then in 1971 parents at the day care center began discussing elementary education.

"They wanted to continue the child-centered learning environment of the day care center through the elementary education years," he added.

The result of these discussions was the opening of the Ironbound Community School, directly across Wilson Avenue from the day care center.

"We began with 20 children in kindergarten through second grade," DeLuca said. Now the center is at 317 Elm St., and it has 60 youngsters from kindergarten through eighth grade.

DeLuca said the school "was funded by the board of education from

1974 through 1979. During that time, we always came out among the highest in reading and math scores in the city.

"Since 1979 it has been funded through foundation grants, fundraising and tuition," he added.

Other programs followed. In 1975 the Ironbound Community Health Project began.

"A lot of doctors had left the area, and there were few clinics around.

"So our focus from the beginning was providing child health screening, up to the ages of 13 or 14, in our mobile vans. We do tests and provide immunizations," he said.

DeLuca said in addition to the free health screenings, the Ironbound Community Health Project conducts a health fair each spring. "We get 300 to 500 adults each time and do a variety of health tests," he said.

The group also is involved in "health advocacy—that is, working on issues of toxic wastes, air and noise pollution, zoning or anything that could provide a problem with the health of the people," he said.

"As we did our child health screenings, we saw youngsters with respiratory problems, allergy problems which could be related to the environment," he said.

Another project, begun in 1976, is the Ironbound Senior Citizens project.

"We do organizing, provide referrals, recreation and each day we provide meals to 60 senior citizens through Meals on Wheels.

"Fourteen percent of the population here is more than 60 years of age and we could see the grandparents and great-grandparents of youngsters we dealt with experiencing problems," he said.

The group has operated the Community Information Center, with information and referrals, at 95 Fleming Ave. since 1977, DeLuca said.

"This is especially important because our community is multilingual. People speaking Portuguese or Spanish get notices from institutions and are unclear about the consequences. We provide enough tools to help them."

The information center publishes Ironbound Voices, a newspaper in three languages, 10 times per year, and produces Ironbound Insights, a cable television program.

In addition, there is the Ironbound Adult Education Project, offering courses in 12 subject areas at 317 Fleming St. There are about 150 students, said DeLuca, and all are getting credit from Essex County College.

DeLuca said the group's budget is about \$600,000, 65 percent of it government funding. "We do organizing, and advocacy on public issues and that is funded privately," he said.

DeLuca feels the group has helped stabilize the neighborhood. "We are organizing neighbors to stand up and say this is my area and I want to make sure the area is better," he said.



Teacher Debbie Fazio instructs a kindergarten class